

Finishing the Race

II Timothy 4:6-8

Believe it or not, I used to be a long distance runner. It's been awhile since I was that ambitious back in the day when my moving parts were more willing to move. Being a hormone-intoxicated teenager, I figured running might be a real chick magnet if I could attain some star-power, which only proved my lack of athletic prowess and romantic sensibilities, since running cross-country in Maine was a lonely sport that sent us out into forests primeval, where we only captured the lurid interests of female moose in heat. However, I did reasonably well, with a few trophies scattered about through my scholastic career, enough to hold up a 1 x 6 plank to serve as a bookshelf in my first year at college.

While a runner, I earnestly trained and performed like I had half a brain about what I was actually doing. I'd get the right running shoes (most of my peers simply pounded upholstery tacks through a pair of hightop sneakers and called them Adidas knock-offs); I tried to imitate the best mechanics for training and stretching; I even read Jim Fixx's famous bible on distance running (which failed to mention the fact that Fixx died at an early age of a heart attack while running). Prior to every race, I'd rehearse in my mind what strategy I'd employ so that I could improve my chances of not finishing last. I'd study the course or the track and think of when I'd make my push or where to conserve energy—where to grab a cup of water and where to confidently stride with correct form in front of my coach.

Yet, for all my efforts, I'd always do the same thing: I'd start out too fast because I was jacked up and full of energy and then suddenly die three-quarters of the way through when my lungs froze up, my legs gave out, and my saliva-slobbered panting was grossing out the handful of spectators who

bothered to come out to watch us lose. While everyone else was sprinting past me to the finish line, I tried to convince my tortured body that there was a measure of dignity in just finishing the race. As I staggered across the line, every finisher who was already rested and in the arms of their girlfriends would come over and give me the proverbial pat on the back with insincere empathy: “Hey man, good race!” Yeah, right, like I had a good race.

Though I never ran well enough to garner public adulation, I did learn a few lessons along the way. One was, don’t start a race you can’t finish. Hence, I never aspired to run the Boston Marathon. Another was, always wear clean shorts when you begin your race, so as not to make your hard earned sweat appear to be something less appealing in the final stretch. Then, the one that has stayed with me forever: plan your run around how you want to finish—be mindful of it all the way through. Don’t start out too fast, don’t set a pace you can’t maintain and, most importantly, recognize when it will take more willpower than God-given abilities to endure and keep going when it is easier to succumb to pain and give up hope. It’s a lesson I still take to heart: run my race throughout my life based not on how well I did starting out as a youth, but on how well I want to finish the race, maintaining the same spirit and objective that propels me through the course to its completion.

All of this makes sense to me in this thing we call life. It doesn’t matter if you can sprint ahead of everyone at the beginning or lead the pack half-way through if you simply collapse and give up before you cross the finish line. Just like a race, life has a starting point and a finish line, and if you want to do well and feel good about your effort, it requires attention and focus all the way through—looking for what lies ahead of you,

preparing for what you will and will not be able to do, trying to complete the race with as much purpose, character, confidence, and earnestness as you had earlier. When your energy starts to wane, when the body encounters its natural limits and the flesh begins to suffer and slow down, sometimes the only thing left is the willpower to persevere—enough to ensure a quality finish to the end. Yes, you may be exhausted, you may find it hard to keep going, but to honor your effort all the way through life, it's important to keep focused on crossing the finish line as well as you can before you let go and earn your rest.

Now, this is not intended to be only a pep talk for those in their senior years or those who, for whatever reason, must reckon with the reality of their own physical decline or even tragic death at any age. As emotionally complex as it may be, embracing death is a message for all of us, at whatever age or stage we find ourselves. The reasons for this are manifold, but the basic question is: how will you live your life to its end? How will you finish your own race, whenever it comes? Will you keep your “eyes on the prize”—looking ahead to what lies beyond this life, or will you find yourself stumbling, struggling to make each step, wondering about the purpose of it all?

Everyone will reach the end of their race at some point. We know that. Death is the great equalizer of humanity despite all the inequities, injustices, and differences that exist between people. But rather than embrace it as a natural part of life, many choose to deny it, or avoid talking about it, leaving themselves unprepared for its eventuality. For practical reasons alone, this doesn't make much sense, since death can occur at any time. But more than that, for the sake of our spirits, for the benefit of our current life, and out of consideration for those we love, a ready awareness

of death forces us to explore a more meaningful purpose for life than simply drifting day to day immersing ourselves in superficial pursuits and pleasures. Reckoning with our eventual death helps us to set priorities in life and address unresolved issues before mortality demands it. The presence of death inspires greater intentionality in life.

The late William Sloan Coffin, who was the chaplain at Yale University and the Senior Minister at the Riverside Church in New York, shared his own insights on the purpose and value of embracing death as an integral part of life (which, I suppose, is what you do if your family name is Coffin!).

Death is more friend than foe. Consider only the alternative—life without death would be interminable—literally, figuratively. We'd take days just to get out of bed, weeks to decide "what's next?" Students would never graduate, faculty meetings and all other gatherings would go on for months. Chances are, we'd be as bored as the ancient Greek gods and up to their same mischievous tricks.

Death cannot be the enemy if it's death that brings us to life. For just as without leave-taking there can be no arrival, without growing old there can be no growing up; without tears, no laughter; so without death there can be no living.¹

The one true freedom in life is to come to terms with death, and as early as possible, for death is an event that embraces all our lives. And the only way to have a good death is to lead a good life. Lead a good one, full of curiosity, generosity, and compassion, and there's no need at close of the day to rage against the dying of the light. We can go gentle into that good night.²

Our text today reflects this outlook. It is one I often use at funerals or memorial services, as many of you know. Tradition credits it to the Apostle Paul near the end of his days, who was mentoring his protégé, Timothy, to take up the mantle of his ministry. Though tradition also claims that Paul was executed during the reign of Nero, his story is not so much defined by his martyrdom, but by his confidence that whether in life or death, facing

¹ William Sloan Coffin, *Credo*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004, pg. 168.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 167.

things present or in things to come—nothing “will be able to separate [him/us] from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

Paul’s sentiments weren’t idle words or religious rhetoric—they were constantly tested as he faced peril and the prospects of his own death that could have occurred within or outside of prison, on land or at sea, on any number of occasions. His was not a sedate, cloistered life. So, by the time his impending death was finally upon him, he wasn’t gloomy or fearful; he had accepted it and was at peace. If anything, his outlook was triumphal. As our text reads, he had already “fought the good fight,” “finished the race,” and through it all he had “kept the faith.”

I don’t think Paul meant to be pretentiously pious here—putting on religious airs to make him sound like a sanctimonious saint. These had to have been his convictions, forged in the crucible of his life. It expresses a genuine, personal confidence that everything was going to be fine, even at life’s end, regardless of how brutal it would be. This kind of confidence would have been cultivated throughout his years (at least as we can tell by his writings)—he always spoke of death without being morbid or fatalistic about it. He did this, I believe, because he was focused not on the manner or timing of his death, but on the wondrous love and mercy of God, who gave him life and sustained him through hardships and peril, repeatedly evident through one experience or another. Paul was consciously aware of his eventual death and embraced it as a fitting conclusion to his life’s journey and to his witness of the gospel hope in Christ’s resurrection.

This is an expression of faith I’ve seen reflected in the outlook of many people I’ve admired over the years—my father being but one example. Instead of cowering in fear, they focused on the love of God in the way they understood it—a love that sustained them throughout their lives through

thick and thin, where any experience of suffering was viewed as a temporary inconvenience or personal challenge which eventually gives way to a far better state—ultimately into an existence where divine and human love are fully realized beyond death.

Is this merely wishful thinking on their part? Perhaps. To a cynic, that's all it is—wishful thinking. But cynics fail to recognize that believing in love is a generative act in itself—love being a power that creates a loving return, just like fears generate more fear when the focus lies in that direction.

How we prepare ourselves for decline and death is largely a choice as to how we will live. If one trusts in the power and presence of divine love at life's most vulnerable moments, if you have experienced the power of protective and compassionate love, then you already know this kind of trust is primal and more beneficial to your soul than anything else. If we cultivate the experience of love and compassion in the character of our lives in the present, then it more naturally prepares us for what will be our focus whenever we encounter decline and death—our own or of one we love.

With that said, I don't want to discount the power of fear, for fear of death hangs over many, evident in the way our world is organized and operates. Insecurities and fear drive people to do a lot of paranoid and destructive things. Yet, if time has shown us anything, the fears people harbor are a greater threat to a sense of wellbeing than is death itself. Mark Twain wisely observed that the fear of death follows a person's fear of life. I think he was right. Those who fear life are more inclined to dread its ending. Those who reinforce their fears in life are more likely to do harm to others and to themselves. At the same time, they leave themselves unprepared to accept and embrace the inevitable and hence it will remain

threatening to them. Fears generate spiritual paralysis within us, inhibiting us from engaging life boldly and generously; likewise, fears prevent people from preparing for death, leaving behind unresolved issues and insecurities.

At the same time, it's hard for people who cannot let go of their insecurities and fears to trust in the power and presence of love. Yes, we're told perfect love casts out fear, but until one experiences and appreciates a meaningful sense of love, they are unable to trust their way through the unknown. That's why it's essential for our wellbeing to intentionally cultivate the virtues of love and mercy in the present—in the relationships of our lives and the larger landscape of life—to help ourselves and others to trust, not doubt, the everlasting power and presence of love and care. Otherwise, any void is left to be filled with fear and dread, or worse jaded cynicism. Love and support, repeatedly and consistently expressed, are powerful antidotes to help a traumatized person's defenses relax enough for them to trust the moment, especially if it involves pain and suffering of any type. When love is strongly sensed, even in death there is an awareness of how good and gentle the end of life can be.

One of the ways I maintain perspective on the matter of death is by reminding myself of de Chardin's definition of our human existence, namely, that we are not human beings on a spiritual journey, but rather, spiritual beings on a human journey. Spirit is eternal, whereas the body is not. The body is only a vessel in which our spirit is temporarily housed. The Apostle said much the same when he remarked, we have this "treasure in clay jars" where the breakable jar (the human body) is only a fragile container for the eternal treasure (the human spirit). In that light, death is

only the end of this race; what we experience in death is a spiritual deliverance into eternity away from our time-limited, mortal bodies.

Let me bring this back to my running days in ancient times of yore. Every runner who begins a race knows that it will be easier at the beginning when the legs are fresh and energy is in ample supply. The real test of a runner is later when the body begins to break down and demand rest, requiring a perseverance and focus to keep pushing to the very end. That's when it takes a strong, disciplined spirit to keep the body moving forward, step-by-step, through pain and stress, until one reaches the finish line.

When the race is finally over, when one has reached the ultimate goal, that is the proper time to celebrate the victory and all who have completed the journey. As a community of faith, that is indeed what we do, regardless of how long these lives have been in our midst. Because, in the end, we know such a celebration is an expression of love—both human and divine—love that redeems us, completes us, restores us, and surrounds us with new life. That is our greatest blessing in life and our reward for a race well run.

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